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Diana Ibañez-Tirado & Magnus Marsden

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Trade ‘outside the law’: Uzbek and Afghan transnational merchants between Yiwu and South-Central Asia

Diana Ibañez-Tirado and Magnus Marsden

Department of Anthropology, Sussex Asia Centre, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the trajectories of two transnational networks present in the Chinese city of Yiwu: Afghan merchants who trade goods in and out Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan; and Uzbek traders (citizens of either Tajikistan or Uzbekistan) who commercialize their merchandise in and out Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Russia. Our aim is to capture an ethnographically grounded understanding of informal markets and economies by analysing the notion of trade ‘outside the law’, including the contested yet widely used category of the ‘smuggler’. By paying attention to the fluidity of trading practices ‘outside the law’, we also address the uses and limitations of metaphors widely used in scholarly analysis of informal markets: notably those of ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ forms of globalization, and the transposition of formal-legal and informal-illegal exchanges onto the notions of economic ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’.

KEYWORDS

Trade; smuggling; illegality; informality; markets; globalization

Introduction

In this article, we explore the commercial trajectories, interactions and activities of traders from South and Central Asia. A key node in the activities of the traders on whom we focus is the city of Yiwu in China’s Zhejiang Province – a commercial hub they visit to procure goods for export and subsequent wholesale. More specifically, we document and analyse two networks: one comprising Afghan traders who move goods in formal and informal ways in and out Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan; and another made up of Uzbek traders who are citizens of either Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, and who transport goods in and out of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Russia.¹ The commercial practices (*tijorat* in Dari and Tajik; *business* in Russian) of these networks are highly complex: legal and formal, as well as illegal and informal, mechanisms of procuring, transporting and reselling their merchandise overlap as goods and traders move in and through Asia. We build on anthropological works that rethink informality and illegal forms of trade and exchange as sometimes being tolerated and at other times prohibited by state officials, and as practices that are experienced by those involved as ‘simultaneously formal, informal, legal and illegal’ (Galemba 2008, 20; see also Anteby 2008; Hartnett and Dawdy 2013; Prentice 2015). Along with other contributions in this special issue on informal economies and markets,

CONTACT Diana Ibañez-Tirado  di40@sussex.ac.uk

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we seek to capture the fact that most of our informants' activities swing back and forth between practices and goods that are legal and those that various authorities and legal systems render as being 'illegal' and existing in 'the shadows' (*tenevoy*, *nezakonny* in Russian; *ghaireqanuni* in Farsi/Tajik). This also reflects aspects of the economy that, as Morris and Polese (2013) have argued, are not in straightforward processes of 'transition' from informal to formalized forms of trade but rather are positioned in relationship to these categories in the context of ongoing political and legal transformations.

A central analytical aim of this article is to engage with a range of metaphors frequently deployed by scholars in their analysis of informal markets. Such metaphors tend to suggest that the contributions made by such spaces to the global economy take place in the 'periphery' and are best conceived of as 'globalization from below', as opposed to more 'formal' forms of economic globalization that are driven by major transnational companies and enterprises. We build on the recognition this body of literature has brought to the significance of informal markets (and those who work within and between them) to globalizing processes. Yet we also suggest three distinct ways in which this approach might benefit from empirical and analytical clarification. First, we highlight the need for scholars to continue emphasizing the interpenetration of formal and informal forms of globalization. In so doing, we illuminate the importance of addressing how the actors involved in 'globalization from below' position their own activities in relationship to formal and informal forms of economic life. Second, we bring attention to the active contributions the traders we have worked with bring to economic globalization and at a variety of levels in a manner that reflects but also transcends the oft-made distinction between formal economic globalization and informal 'globalization from below'.

Trade outside the law, including smuggling, is of enduring historic significance in many contexts. As a result, it is analytically unhelpful to treat such modes of trade one-dimensionally, as a response by peripheral economic actors to formal forms of economic globalization enacted by multi-national companies. In a recent study, Mathew (2016) explored the ways in which the trade in counterfeit goods posed a threat to emerging forms of capitalism in the Arabian Sea. Similarly, Tagliacozzo (2002, 192) has suggested that, in South-East Asia, such informal modes of trade arose in the context of 'the political economy of corruption, the functioning of ethnic networks, and knowledge of local geographies'. In the study of Central Asia, Spector (2017) has argued that informal merchants in Kyrgyzstan have sought to tackle illegal practices and thus achieve institutional order and predictability in the local bazaars following the instability of the 1990s by playing an active role in the creation of trade unions. Building on studies that emphasize such historic interpenetrations between formal and informal forms of trade, we argue that the forms of trade outside the law on which we focus are not simply a response to modern and formal forms of economic globalization. Rather, they are of historic and enduring significance, inform important values in relationship to which traders lead their daily lives – including notions of freedom, autonomy and masculinity – and seek to perform and achieve through their labours of moving money, goods and commercial personnel between China and Central and South Asia.

The article deploys the concept of 'freedom of form' or 'formlessness' to illuminate the ways in which marketplaces constantly seek to escape the constraints of clear yet unrealistic structures and boundaries (Gandolfo 2013). Formlessness appeals to the fluidity of the trade outside the law conducted by our informants. At the same time, the fluidity

intrinsic to such a mode of operating also questions the relevance of the hierarchies inherently embedded in metaphors such as ‘globalization from below’ and ‘centre vs periphery’ for understanding this type of regional and global trade. In her ethnography of markets in Lima, Gandolfo (2013) develops the notion of ‘formlessness’ to emphasize the ways both traders and state officials subtly challenge the range of institutions that seek to discipline and formalize marketplaces. As we explore in what follows, our informants regard activities ‘outside the law’ as absolutely necessary to conducting commerce in the contexts across which they work: both groups of traders often remark, ‘we have no option other than finding a route around the law’ (*roh, ekhtyar* in Dari/Tajik; *variant* in Russian). Although such remarks may suggest these traders’ lack of alternatives, our ethnographic material suggests that for the people with whom we have worked, trade ‘outside the law’ is more than an economy of survival, a coping activity at times of crisis, or a mechanism to maximize profit. Trade outside the law also encompasses moral values and aesthetic standards that our informants invest in the ability to engage with formlessness: they find pleasure, risk, achievement and aspiration in their subtle, and at times more direct, modes of challenging institutional and legal trading conventions. An expanding body of literature has brought attention to the aesthetic dynamics of practices that have conventionally been regarded by anthropologists as immoral (e.g., Anderson 2011). In his work on the Mediterranean, Achilli (2018, 92) identifies ‘the morality of smugglers’ as a shared moral universe that is inhabited by migrants and smugglers. In this universe, illegality and deception involve mutuality and reciprocity: rather than being opposite poles, they work simultaneously with one another along a continuum, and this also fosters strong bonds between smugglers, customers and migrants. Ethnographically, we find a similar interaction between formlessness and our informants’ moral universes. This is especially visible in relationship to their modes of enacting masculinity, their attitudes to inter-generational knowledge, and their shifting understandings of the reputational consequences of trading outside the law.

Informality and globalization: the metaphors of below/above and centre/periphery

‘Globalization from below’ and ‘low-end globalization’ are concepts that contrast informal and small-scale commerce with ‘high-end globalization’ in the form of institutionally transnational and affluent corporations. Globalization from below is ‘the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, often semi-legal or illegal transactions, often associated with the “developing world”, but in fact apparent across the globe’ (Mathews and Alba Vega 2012, 1). Forms of commerce associated with globalization from below are widely conceived of as taking place in and across informal markets, mainly through illegal forms of trade such as piracy, the copying of goods, and smuggling (Yang 2012; Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2014; Lan 2017). There is also recognition of the ways in which informal and illegal practices are embedded in the operation of officially registered companies and corporations, as well as in global capitalism more generally (Tett 2010; Phillips 2011; Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009; Rajak and Dolan 2016). Informality is integral to the production and reproduction of the global economy, not only to forms of ‘globalization from below’ (Millar 2008; Zack 2014). Furthermore, states are central to the production of the moments at which illegality and informality is condoned

or permitted to openly take place (Schneider and Schneider 2008; Faroqhi 2012; Endres 2014; Rasanayagam, Beyer, and Reeves 2014). Scholars in the social sciences and history have brought recognition to the ways in which the activities of trading networks are rendered illegal or informal as a result of the legal frameworks that have emerged from state-law, and the interpenetration of state-law with multinational corporations (Tagliacozzo 2009; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Galembe 2008; Ferradás 2013). The concept of globalization from below has done a great deal of conceptual work in bringing attention to alternative actors in processes of globalization. At the same time, however, it reifies the different levels and hierarchies at which globalizing processes take place.

In sum, scholarship on 'globalization from below' rightly identifies the individuals, networks and communities involved in informal markets as the authors and agents of global interconnectivity. At the same time, however, the term tends to reinforce distinctions between on the one hand illegal, informal, and at times criminal activities, and on the other hand forms of economic globalization that are formalized, large-scale and organized in relationship to stable legal frameworks. As Galembe (2008, 21) argues, 'the continuing portrayal of the state as one cohesive entity tends to ... reproduce the formal/informal dichotomy'.

Scholarship on smuggling networks also tends to reproduce the binary categories of centre/periphery, legal/illegal, and formal/informal. Scholars often conceive of smuggling activities as belonging to 'peripheral' and 'informal' market spaces. Such categories are frequently invested with a spatial definition, as taking place at the borders of the nation-state. Yeğen (1996), for example, argues that the legal distinction is *spatialized* in terms of the practices that are portrayed as happening at the 'centre' (legal), and others that thrive at the 'periphery' or margins of the state (illegal; cf. Bruns and Miggelbrink 2012). Borders are represented as the periphery, and informality and illegality as peripheral and thus secondary if not corrosive to national economies (Galembe 2013; Pınar Şenoğuz 2015). At the global scale, such activities are regarded as marginal, in the sense that national and international law forbid them. Concepts such as 'globalization from below' also spatialize them in reinforcing the idea that this form of economic life is most vibrant in the global periphery, or indeed its underbelly. Such hierarchies also reflect moral evaluations of the agency and identities of the actors: while recognized as contributing to globalization, scholarship confines the implication of their agency to the periphery, defined above all in term of its informality.²

Our case studies concerning Uzbek and Afghan trading networks focus on trading practices that are involved in the smuggling of goods across multiple boundaries. We explore how individuals and networks involved in the trade in commodities between Yiwu and Central and South Asia regard themselves as skilled in forging capillary-like routes for their activities that criss-cross formal and informal markets and commercial practices. We also point to their own critical awareness that their activities are regarded by external observers as 'informal', 'illegal' and 'small-scale', documenting the specific ways in which they position themselves morally in relationship to such perceptions, as well as to constant shifts in the legal and political environments across which they work.

After briefly introducing the fieldwork on which the article is based, in the following section, we discuss the inherently oscillating nature of the activities of traders who work 'outside the law'. First, we explore interpenetrations between formal and informal spheres by documenting how the status of merchandise changes from legal to illegal in moving through the commercial chains. Second, we analyse how traders' moral

evaluations of the nature of their activities swing between, on the one hand, the notion of being forced by their circumstances to break the law in order to make a profit, and on the other, of deriving forms of pleasure, autonomy and achievement from their involvement in such forms of trade.

A note on the fieldwork

The article is based on ethnographic research with traders from Afghanistan and Central Asia in the officially designated trade city of Yiwu, China, and in the various markets to which traders based in that city export their goods.³ We initially met most of the traders we discuss in the article during fieldwork in Yiwu and the wholesale markets in which they deal in goods procured in China. But our ability to establish such relations also builds on experiences in the mid-1990s of education in Moscow (Diana) and of fieldwork in northern Pakistan (Magnus), during which time we came to know individuals who went on to become global commodity traders (for more details see Marsden 2016a; Ibañez-Tirado 2019). Magnus communicates with his informants in Dari and Pashto, and Diana in Tajik and Russian. We gathered the data primarily by spending time with the traders in their offices, shops, warehouses and homes, the wholesale markets in which they work, and the restaurants and hotels they regularly frequent. We attended our informants' social gatherings, accompanied them on trips to purchase goods for export, helped load containers, and sat with them in their shops and restaurants while contributing to discussions they had with their fellow traders about trade and life on the move. Diana attended daily lessons in Chinese language for foreign traders and their families in Yiwu (over a period of five months); she interviewed approximately 30 male and female traders from Tajikistan in the city, of both Uzbek and Tajik background. She followed up her research in Yiwu by conducting ethnographic research in a bridal shop in Dushanbe and undertaking semi-structured interviews in wholesale markets in Dushanbe and Khujand. Magnus interacted regularly with approximately 50 traders from Afghanistan in Yiwu, and explored the activities of these traders in the countries in which they work, making a series of visits to Afghanistan (especially Kabul, Herat and Mazar-e Sharif) and Saudi Arabia (Jeddah), and joint fieldwork with Diana in Turkey (Istanbul) and Ukraine (Odessa). We have also conducted structured and semi-structured interviews with foreign traders from a broader range of backgrounds – 35 of these interviews are publicly available as video recordings (Ibañez-Tirado and Wu 2018). To protect the anonymity of the interlocutors in this article, not all of them are included in the publicly available recordings.

Yiwu: trade 'outside the law' and 'freedom of form'

Yiwu is a city of 2 million inhabitants, of which 14,000 are foreign traders, in China's commercially vibrant Zhejiang Province. For a variety of trading networks, diasporas and communities across the globe, Yiwu is a node from which to purchase and transport 'small commodities' mainly available in the city's main wholesale market – Futian. These commodities include items of everyday use, like umbrellas, stationery, socks, toys, souvenirs, lights, tools, cosmetics, kitchenware, bags and sunglasses. In addition to the Futian market, Yiwu also hosts the Huangyuen garment market, a furniture market, and the more recently opened machinery market; many factories are also located in the city or nearby.

Foreign traders in Yiwu can be classified as itinerant visitors or permanent residents. Itinerant traders mostly visit Yiwu for two to three weeks once or twice a year to select goods and place orders, though we also know informants from both the networks studied in this article who visit Yiwu monthly. 'Permanent' traders live in Yiwu, mostly holding renewable one- or two-year visas on the basis of having registered trading and cargo companies with the local authorities. Approximately 3000 foreign companies from around the world operate in the city (Jacobs 2016; Rui 2018). Most of these identify themselves as from North Africa (Belguidoum and Pliez 2015), the Levant and Arabian Peninsula (Anderson 2018), South Asia (Cheuk 2016; Marsden 2016b, 2017), Africa (Bodomo and Ma 2010), or the post-Soviet world (Ibañez-Tirado 2018; Skvirskaja 2018). Most permanent foreign traders run their own businesses (e.g., exporting goods to a wholesale shop in their home country) at the same time as providing services to merchants visiting Yiwu to purchase goods. The networks of traders we analyse here concern a great variety of informal trading practices or intertwined forms of legal, informal and illegal activities conducted in Yiwu and its connected commercial outposts in South-West and Central Asia.

Informal practices involve, for example, the brokerage of merchandise on credit from Chinese suppliers based on face-to-face agreements between local sellers and foreign traders permanently residing in Yiwu, as well as the resulting disputes that frequently arise when such debts are not paid on time. Although there are official channels in Yiwu to mediate this type of commercial dispute, and sellers and buyers can file their cases at the local police station, it is more common that the arguing parties avoid such channels and solve their disputes among themselves. Thus, practices such as naming and shaming debtors in social media, harassing and threatening such actors in their offices, or deploying violence to recover debts are not unheard of. Other common practices in Yiwu that are sanctioned to different degrees by local and international commercial laws include the purchase of merchandise that infringes copyright and trademark laws, the forging of invoices to secure tax returns or pay lower customs clearance fees, and various tax-avoidance mechanisms.

At particular geopolitical junctures, goods that were bought legally in Yiwu can turn into illegal merchandise once shipped from China. In 2016 and 2017 Tajikistan passed laws to encourage citizens (especially women) to wear 'national clothes' (Ibañez-Tirado 2016). As a result, 'Western'-style wedding dresses were banned in the country: one of our Tajik informants ended up with 200 dresses from Yiwu 'stuck' in Tajikistan's customs office. Eventually, these traders managed to import the items to Tajikistan 'informally' – by bribing customs officers (*tamozhny*) – as such dresses continue to be popular among Tajikistan's brides, and state officials oversee the ban. Similarly, military clothing, such as boots, is available for purchase in Yiwu, but it is illegal for such items to be transited through Kazakhstan: Afghan traders mostly send them to Afghanistan using sea routes, though sometimes the goods are rejected by Kazakh customs posts.

In Yiwu our informants are also involved in the wholesale acquisition of goods 'outside the law'. This mainly involves the procurement of counterfeit products: pirated goods, or goods that have been copied from another (original) good with a patent, copyright or trademark and labelled without the authorization of the owner of the copyright/patent (Aguiar 2012). They also purchase counterfeit products, called 'knockoffs', or copies that resemble 'original' goods but which do not bear the exact name or logo (e.g., 'Giorgio

Arnami' or 'Gusci' products). While the wholesale procurement, transport and resale of counterfeit goods is illegal in most countries, knockoffs are usually lawful yet still regarded with suspicion by the authorities because of their low quality or because they are designed to deceive consumers.

Another dimension of products purchased in Yiwu that infringe the law arises from the processes of packaging and marketing by traders in the city. In the city's main commercial streets there are numerous printing companies (mostly run by Chinese nationals) which produce labels, boxes and packages for fabricated goods. Traders can ask such shops to print brand labels and product information details that may or may not be the correct description of the merchandise for sale. Diana accompanied Farhod, a trader from Tajikistan visiting Yiwu, to print labels saying 'Made in Ukraine' for dresses produced in the city of Suzhou, China. The Chinese owner of one such printing shop told Diana that her work was 'printing': she did not question whether the labels and packages were accurate or whether the product itself broke Chinese or international commercial laws. Farhod eventually imported to Tajikistan merchandise with forged labels and packaging by bribing customs officials to cover the service of speeding up the release of the container. Officers in Tajikistan expect to receive such bribes whether the merchandise is lawful or not; in this case it also allowed Farhod to overcome other irregularities concerning the goods he had loaded in that container, including low-quality shoes with the logos of major brands. Farhod and several other informants often argued that producing this type of packaging and labels, as well as the counterfeit brands themselves, represented 'the only way' they could sell and make a profit from products purchased in Yiwu. In Tajikistan, Farhod and other informants told us that only by paying bribes could they import to the country the merchandise they purchased in China – a common dimension of the region's 'informal economies' (see introduction in this issue; Rasanayagam 2011; Morris and Polese 2013; Makovicky and Henig 2017; Ibañez-Tirado 2018).

Although traders such as Farhod portray the payment of bribes and the forging of labels and invoices as resulting from their 'not having an option', trading practices 'outside the law' also carry a subtle aesthetic pleasure and sense of achievement that, at times, has been narrated by our informants as a noteworthy aspect of their working lives. These forms of pleasure and achievement that our interlocutors convey while they narrate their trading strategies recall the notion of 'freedom of form' proposed by Gandolfo (2013, 288). 'Freedom of form' in this context refers to particular aspects of the informal economy and the forms of exchange with which it is entwined. The term suggests an incitement to institutional forms and disciplined arrangements of the market that are particularly evident when traders and shopkeepers display cunningness, creativity and other skills to conduct their commercial activities in a way that allows them to continue navigating around the law. Having 'freedom of form' differs from 'not having an option' because the latter emphasizes the trader's being compelled by various circumstances to break the law in order to make a profit from commercial activities. In contrast, 'freedom of form' involves other aspects of the traders' lives that they value and regard as important: their ability to display autonomy and resourcefulness to make their business thrive in a competitive environment such as Yiwu. Both skills and calculations in the 'freedom of form' also allow our informants to chart routes around the state law concerning customs clearance, to make a profit, and to value their self-sufficiency and autonomy by not working for a fixed salary – the central ethical ambition of Afghan traders (Marsden

2016b). At the same time, the opportunities our informants have to display their trading skills ‘outside the law’ also allow them the possibility of expanding their trading activities. In the next section, we analyse in more detail the activities and commercial endeavours of Uzbek traders from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and how they portray themselves as being forced by the circumstances of their everyday lives to smuggle goods.

Central Asian trading networks: Uzbeks from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

The number of traders from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan operating in Yiwu is relatively small in comparison to other major trading groups in the city, such as those of Afghan background (described in the following section).⁴ In 2016, at the time of our fieldwork, there were three well-established trading and cargo companies and two restaurants from Tajikistan in the city, and three restaurants and approximately 15 trading and cargo companies from Uzbekistan. Diana established contact with approximately 30 male and female traders from Tajikistan in Yiwu. The great majority of Central Asian traders in Yiwu were temporary visitors who stayed on business trips, usually lasting little more than two weeks. Traders from Tajikistan who lived in Yiwu tended to have enough capital to buy goods by the container and export these to their home country; larger-scale traders also exported goods to Russia. We also met traders from Tajikistan who owned factories close to Moscow and were involved in the manufacturing of small commodities, such as toothpicks.

Traders from Uzbekistan tended to have larger and more resilient companies, with the capital to export not only to Uzbekistan and Russia but also to Germany and the US. Like the Afghans, such companies worked through networks of Uzbek traders in Western Europe and North America. According to the owner of an Uzbek company in Yiwu, his business associates in Germany and California left Uzbekistan in the early 1990s. Having acquired US and European passports, they established trading companies in the countries where they had settled. Equally important were traders from Uzbekistan who began their commercial careers in South Korea: we met traders in Dogdaemun Market in Seoul (in 2016) who had initially gone to South Korea to work as labourers and later started to trade in cloth between South Korea and Uzbekistan. Another company owner in Yiwu had once run a partner office in Seoul overseeing trading activities that involved the export of merchandise from both Yiwu and Seoul to Uzbekistan. She closed her office in Seoul to expand her business in China through the commercialization of raw material (especially the import of metals used in construction, and the export of diverse fittings for construction). Trading networks from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Yiwu operate on a smaller scale than both those of Afghan background and those connected to Afghanistan; yet among the traders from Tajikistan, those who identify themselves as being Uzbek tend to form networks that cross borders and regions (Ibañez-Tirado 2018). For this reason, we focus on networks of traders from Uzbek background that involve mainly Tajikistan’s citizens.⁵

A toy shop in Khujand: *kontraband* across borders

Diana met Aka Ikrom and his brother Aka Farukh in a wholesale container-market in the outskirts of Khujand, the main city in northern Tajikistan’s Sughd Province, in 2017. Aka Ikrom (who was in his early fifties) and Aka Farukh (in his early forties) were sitting

inside an old container with well-arranged shelves displaying an abundance of plastic toys. Unhurriedly drinking tea, they served their retail customers while sitting behind a small till placed on a time-worn wooden table. After a couple of visits, they eventually explained to Diana that in addition to this 'small' shop, they also owned several shops and warehouses in this market, and three shops in a desirable area on Khujand's main street, which they rented to traders who imported high-end clothes, shoes and perfumes from Turkey.

Together with other members of their extended family, the brothers have been involved in diverse trading activities over the past two decades. From an ethnically Uzbek family based in the city of Istaravshan (south of Khujand), these traders established their profitable businesses in a series of stages. Initially they moved goods and products (legally and illegally) across the Tajik–Uzbek border. They then moved on to import merchandise from Russia and China, including Yiwu, to Tajikistan. Finally, the brothers established a complex network of imports and exports that involved all of these countries. Although they said that they were not directly involved in moving goods to and from Kyrgyzstan, they also reported having plenty of clients in the country.⁶ From their unassuming appearance and relatively small retail shop outside Khujand, it was difficult to get a sense of these brothers' businesses, trading experience, travels and aspirations for their children.

Aka Ikrom and Aka Farukh attributed some of their success to having been able to accumulate profit from diverse business ventures over the years, and developing good business relations with their relatives in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), as well as work with their third brother (Aka Timur), who had established a business in Sennoy Market in Saint Petersburg in 2009. The brothers also explained that their trade across different borders depended on the 'friendship' (Rus. *druzhba*) relations they have fostered with border officials in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, who intermittently facilitated the movement of contraband goods (Rus. *kontraband*; Taj. *qochoq*). Thus, they had been able to establish a trading network that often involved the smuggling of merchandise across regional borders.

'We are not bandits! We do not trade with dangerous goods or drugs or anything like that!' Aka Ikrom told Diana between bursts of laughter. 'When I say *kontraband* I mean things like these toys you see here, or other goods that sometimes are not allowed to cross the border.' Indeed, one of their commercial lines of activity involved toys manufactured in Uzbekistan and Russia. From Uzbekistan they imported colourful sets of building blocks and tool kits for toddlers, while from Russia they sourced balls and other toys made out of rubber. According to the brothers, the quality and price of rubber toys and building blocks was better in Russia and Uzbekistan than in China. But their main imports did come from China: once or twice a year the brothers visited Yiwu to purchase low-grade toys (e.g., balls, cars, dolls, and figures of famous super-heroes), as well as headscarves and leggings.

According to the brothers, their clients in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan do not tend to buy expensive toys or headscarves, so they made a profit through the volume of goods in which they were able to deal. To sell enough goods to make a profit they had to trade beyond Tajikistan through a complicated cross-border circuit. At the same time as legally importing several containers of toys (some of them pirated in Yiwu and infringing copyright laws) to Tajikistan from China (storing these in their warehouses in Khujand), they also illegally passed some of the merchandise on to Uzbekistan. Aka Ikrom called Uzbekistan's import tariffs and system for such low-grade goods a 'nightmare'

(Rus. *koshmar*) due to legislation that made importing goods that could harm Uzbekistan's internal production 'impossible' (Rus. *nevozmozhno*). This legislation affected the trade in toys and leggings, which they openly referred to as constituting a form of smuggling (Taj. *qochoq*) to 'the other side' (Rus. *na to storonu*).

Yet in Uzbekistan they did not only provide their clients with smuggled and low-priced goods destined for sale in wholesale and retail shops. According to Aka Ikrom, one of their relatives in Uzbekistan ran a textile factory: a large registered company that was supposed to produce, in addition to branded cotton T-shirts and underwear, women's black leggings decorated with hot-fixed rhinestones. Such leggings, however, could not compete with the smuggled Chinese versions, so the factory owner himself was said to buy Yiwu-made leggings from Aka Ikrom, which they then arranged to be smuggled across Tajikistan's border to supply his factory. According to Aka Ikrom, after they had arrived in the factory the goods were labelled with the local brand and with a label saying 'Made in Uzbekistan'. This was not the case for T-shirts and underwear, which the owner of the factory could indeed produce in Uzbekistan at competitive prices; Aka Ikrom smuggled these items of clothing to Tajikistan for sale on a wholesale basis. While most of their activities involved moving goods imported from China to Tajikistan towards Uzbekistan, the brothers also occasionally smuggled domestic appliances such as electric ovens and washing machines from Russia and Uzbekistan into Tajikistan. But the shop and warehouses they operated from in Khujand were legal and paid taxes.

These Uzbek traders have built their networks of partners and customers, as well as their knowledge and skills, through decades of travelling and finding ways to navigate around the law. But their search for business prospects was often narrated as arising from changing geopolitical contexts and other adverse circumstances affecting business which gave them 'no other option'. As we have mentioned, the notion of having no option other than breaking the law also conveyed the potentials, aspirations and forms of pleasure offered by the 'freedom of form' encountered between legal and illegal forms of trade. These traders envisioned expanding their business ventures to Latvia and Western Europe. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Aka Ikrom had travelled to Germany and Spain to buy second-hand lorries of a renowned German brand to drive back to be sold in the 'East'. He reported to Diana in a proud tone that he had sold one of these trucks to an old friend in Ukraine, and several other trucks to clients in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In the following years, he began to travel to Latvia to procure second-hand European cars for export to Tajikistan. During this time, he enjoyed travelling and taking photographs of his journeys. He showed such images to prove, as he put it to Diana, that his story was 'true' and to show how 'clever' he had been. But recently the situation had radically changed, making the procurement of EU visas almost impossible for holders of Tajikistan passports, and the brothers now had no other 'option' than to smuggle goods across Central Asian borders. To continue demonstrating forms of pleasure in trading activities outside the law, Aka Ikrom explained how his eldest son, Makhsudbek, had gained admission to a university in Latvia in 2017 for a preparatory course in English. This was as a prerequisite to pursue a BA in economics. Makhsudbek had been of no help to his father in Khujand's shop over the years (he constantly refused to work there), but was still regarded as the entry of the next generation of family business to Europe. Asked why he had chosen Latvia, Aka Ikrom said that they did not have an option (Rus. *drugova varyanta netu*): 'Latvia is good for us. There are many Russians and

Uzbeks, and the universities are good there. There is also good business there, and after all, Latvia is Europe, isn't it?

Indeed, Aka Ikrom's intentions were not simply that Makhsubek study in Latvia but that, with his student visa, he begin exploring opportunities for business there. Latvia was well known to Aka Ikrom through his vehicle trading, when he had made a profit while conducting trade in the 'freedom of form' of previously less regulated visa and border regimes throughout Europe and Eurasia.⁷

In the next section, we analyse Afghan trading networks and how they are involved in trading practices outside the law. In this analysis, we emphasize the importance of the circulation of commercial ideas and practices in the expansive arenas to which Yiwu and Central and South Asia are connected.

Afghan trading networks and inter-Asian commerce

Merchants from Afghanistan constitute an important and increasingly visible trading presence in Yiwu. Traders from Afghanistan in Yiwu identify with a range of ethno-linguistic categories, including most importantly Tajik, Pashtun, Uzbek, Turkmen and Hazara. Some traders in the city also identify with religious minorities that have been long important players in Afghanistan's commercial dynamics, especially Afghan Sikhs and Hindus (Dale 1994; Levi 2002, 2015). While Afghanistan is an important destination for the goods these traders purchase in Yiwu and elsewhere in China, not all traders who identify themselves as being from Afghanistan are principally concerned with the China–Afghanistan trade. Indeed, it is possible to identify different trading networks of merchants from Afghanistan based on the countries in which they do business. Many of the approximately 182 trading offices registered to Afghans in Yiwu arrange the transportation of Chinese commodities to Afghanistan. Yet some of the earliest foreign traders in Yiwu were Afghans who arrived in the city in the mid-1990s from Russia and Ukraine. These traders had purchased goods from Urumqi, in Xinjiang, and from Harbin, until discovering that better deals were to be found in Yiwu (Marsden 2015). Another region with which traders from Afghanistan in Yiwu deal is the Arabian Peninsula. Traders ship commodities (especially ready-made clothing, prayer mats and prayer beads) to Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Oman in particular, mostly to established Afghan trading communities settled in each of these settings (Marsden 2018). Finally, increasing numbers of Yiwu-based Afghans are now also seeking commercial partnerships with their co-nationals who have settled in European countries, especially the UK, the Netherlands and Germany (Marsden 2017).

The traders who make up these networks hold and handle diverse positions regarding the relationship of their activities to the domain of the law. Similar to the Uzbek traders analyzed above, who justify their participation in *kontraband* activities by explaining that their merchandise is mainly toys and textiles and thus not harmful, Afghan traders relate in contrasting ways to the category of the 'smuggler' (*qochoqbar*). But this is currently a loaded and contested term in Afghan trading circles. In the context of the post-9/11 US-led invasion of the country, much public discourse in Afghanistan has focused on the activities of smugglers involved in high-value forms of illegality in the country, notably the trade in narcotics (especially but not solely heroin) and also of arms (*salah*) and of 'black money' (*pul-e siyah*). As a result, identification with the category of smuggler entails significant legal and reputational consequences – locally and internationally – for

merchants from Afghanistan. It is therefore an issue of great sensitivity for most Afghan traders. Unlike the Uzbek traders discussed above, it is rare for Afghans to identify with the category in a positive manner, though many do freely admit that intermediaries with whom they work 'smuggle' their goods across international borders.

The sensitivity in how Afghan traders relate to the category of 'smuggler' is most visible in the activities of those involved in the trade in high-value commodities. One of Magnus's long-term informants (Haji Tuki), for example, is a Dubai-based merchant involved in the export of Indian-made cigarettes to Afghanistan. The trader – who, before moving his business to Dubai, was based in Afghanistan and then Pakistan – openly talks about the high-level linkages that allow Afghan companies to play a major role in the cigarette trade. According to Haji Tuki, the biggest and most formal Afghan company in the cigarette trade is the official distribution agent of a brand of cigarettes made in an East Asian country. Having recently been awarded several substantial government contracts, his company is also influential in Afghanistan; the same company was also at the centre of considerable controversy in Afghanistan when it secured access, presumably because of its close connections to high-level state officials, to prime warehouse space in Kabul. Yet according to Haji Tuki, the way this company has been successful is through cultivating relationships with high-level officials in the third countries in which it does business, especially in the Russian Federation. Thus, the company has been supplying countries across the post-Soviet world with branded cigarettes since the collapse of the Soviet Union. 'It is a known secret', Haji Tuki told Magnus, 'that the company bosses enjoy access to major officials in the countries in which they trade. They are able thus to move their products without paying the relevant taxes and duties.' This case shows the importance of informal practices to the activities of influential companies active in formal expressions of economic globalization. The trope of 'globalization from below' is of only partial help in bringing attention to such hybrid forms of commerce, which involve historically evolving interpenetrations between formal and informal economic activities.

The role of Afghan traders in the cigarette business in Russia and Central Asia also reveals interpenetrations between small-scale actors and large companies. Afghan traders have interacted with Central Asian trading networks in the transport and sale of cigarettes since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the most lucrative activity for Afghan traders in Central Asia was the cigarette trade. Afghans were involved in the transportation of Bulgarian-made cigarettes from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan; most cigarettes crossed the border between the two countries near Tajikistan's northern city of Khujand. At the time, Khujand was an important commercial node for several hundred traders from Afghanistan. The trade in cigarettes required Afghans to handle and safeguard large quantities of cash, which made them the focus of the security agencies of both countries. In Tashkent, the city in which Afghans sold most of the cigarettes they transported from Tajikistan, Afghan money transfer agents were also active, including Afghan Hindu and Sikhs – ethno-religious minority communities that have been critical to trade between South and Central Asia over the past 200 years. It was in this broader context that the large transnational company discussed was able to rise to prominence in the field.

Central Asia's regimes became increasingly hostile to the activities of foreign traders in the context of attempts to establish monopolies and reinforce the boundaries of the nation-state after the initial years of upheaval following the collapse of the Soviet

Union. Against this backdrop, networks such as those comprising Afghan traders no longer operate as they did a decade or more previously. Haji Tuqi tells Magnus that he only imports the cigarettes from India and Dubai to Afghanistan, and from there

the smugglers can do with them what they wish: they manage their movement across the borders to the SNG [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries, not me. I can't work in those places; they're all corrupt – it's a headache, and you put your life at risk.

Haji Tuki's remark underscores the point made above about how Afghan traders currently distance themselves from the category of 'smuggler'. The Haji's comments also point to the stigma associated with smuggling in Afghanistan today. Yet he also recognizes that the distinction between 'formal globalization' and 'globalization from below' rests on a binary distinction between formal and informal modes of commerce that bears little relevance to how even established transnational companies work.

There is considerable variation in the extent to which the traders conceive the category of 'smuggler' as suitable in their trade in Chinese commodities for everyday use; the variation often relates to the specific contexts in which the traders work. At one end of the spectrum, traders involved in the export of goods between China and Afghanistan openly admit that for very different reasons – ranging from registration of lower-than-real invoice costs to not paying customs duties at the Afghan border – their activities and those of their companions are 'outside the law' (*ghaireqanuni*). But rather than thinking of such practices as smuggling, they mostly refer to the 'system' in which they work as one in which 'corruption' (*fesod*) is pervasive. Traders argue that this leaves them 'no option' (*digar chara nist*) other than to chart alternative routes (*rah*) around the law and to strike deals with corrupt officials. Importantly, the traders are also aware that the 'system' is itself international and embedded in legal agreements. For example, a trader in Kabul said to Magnus,

We'd much rather pay our dues as taxes so it could be used for the benefit of my country. But when we tell the government this, they say they have an agreement with the IMF that they will not raise custom duties, so doing so is impossible.

At the other end of the spectrum, Yiwu-based traders make strenuous efforts to publicly distance themselves from illegal activities. For example, a union of transport companies established and registered in Yiwu in 2019 publicly informed Afghan traders using WeChat that their members would not agree to transport fake branded commodities to Afghanistan.

Inter-regional commercial interaction

As mentioned, a specific geographic context in which interactions between traders from Afghanistan and Central Asia is evident is wholesale markets across the former Soviet Union. Traders from Afghanistan are involved in the export-import of commodities between China, Russia and Ukraine. This mode of business is heavily dependent on activities the traders refer to as smuggling, especially the import of goods from China without paying formal duties and taxes. It is also openly recognized that the money used to pay for this trade is 'black', in the sense that it has not been taxed in the Russian Federation. Similarly, the traders are dependent on being able to re-export goods across international borders after 'importing' them from China: commodities are thus smuggled between

Ukraine and Russia.⁸ To do so, Afghan traders must work closely with local smugglers and their networks in these countries – they are responsible for the physical movement of commodities across national boundaries.

Afghan traders are ambiguous and self-reflexive in critical ways about their participation in such practices. A trader in his late forties remarked to Magnus in his office in Kabul:

Often the authorities in Moscow come and raid the markets where the Afghans work, closing businesses and confiscating goods. We complain and say how bad it is. In fact, though, we are wrong [*ma malamast astim*]. We bring in goods the black way [*rah-e siyah*], we don't pay duties, and then we also complain when we are penalized.

Indeed, traders not only highlight the moral failings of how their community conducts business and interacts with the authorities of the countries in which they work – they also dwell on the effects that such modes of work have on their collective well-being:

We Afghans are bad. We want to sell as much of something as possible. We don't care about the price, just about the volume. We sell lots of stuff at the lowest price. Other communities (like the Yemenis) are happy to sell little at a decent price. They have unity. We are involved in self-destruction.

Traders from Afghanistan not only adapt to the conditions of conducting trade in the former Soviet Union, they also reflect critically on its effect on their collective and individual identities and reputations. The traders also compare their mode of doing business to other models of commercial activity of which they are aware: Afghans regularly encounter Yemenis in Yiwu and also in the Arabian Peninsula, another region in which they are commercially active.

Another specific context that has been important for the commercial interactions between traders from Central and South Asia is the Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier region. Many traders currently based in Yiwu ran businesses in the Karkhano market during the 1990. The Karkhano market emerged in the 1960s in the context of the Afghanistan–Pakistan transit agreement, which allowed goods routed for Afghanistan to pass through Pakistani territory on a transit basis. At the time, duties on many goods imported to Afghanistan were less than in Pakistan, where customs charges were also more regularly enforced. Thus, a substantial business emerged in the smuggling of commodities from Afghanistan to Pakistan. A key market in which such commodities were sold was the Karkhano market, in the Federally Associated Tribal Areas, a specific legal space in which Pakistan's federal laws did not apply (Marsden and Hopkins 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, some of the trade across the border was organized by companies in Pakistan that purchased goods in Kabul from Afghan importers. In the 1980s and 1990s, an increasing proportion of businesses in the market were run by merchant families from Afghanistan that had relocated to Peshawar in the context of the Soviet invasion (1979). By the mid-2000s, the Karkhano market was in decline because of rising duties on goods imported to Afghanistan, as well as the increasing porosity of Pakistan's markets to Chinese commodities imported directly to the country by Pakistani traders. In this period, Afghan traders who had run businesses in the Karkhano for much of the past three decades increasingly moved their business to Afghanistan, Dubai or Yiwu.

Traders in Yiwu today regularly talk openly about their activities in the Karkhano market over this period as being a form of smuggling. Abid, for example, is now in his mid-forties; based in Yiwu since 2003, he is involved in the export of socks to Afghanistan, and of cosmetics to the UAE, where he is also a partner in a chain of Afghan restaurants. Abid is a respectable figure among Yiwu's Afghans, having invested in a sock factory in a town located near the city. But he talks openly about the role he and thousands of Afghans played in smuggling goods across the Pakistan–Afghanistan border in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, he told me that his company specialized in high-grade cosmetics and perfumes imported as air cargo to the Jalalabad airfield during the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan (1995–2001). Abid and other traders would arrange for the transportation of the goods across the Pakistan–Afghanistan border – often using horses and mules – before selling them to wholesale buyers from across Pakistan in the Karkhano market.

These traders themselves often talk about the transition they have undergone from cross-border smugglers during the Taliban government to respectable 'international' traders today, with activities in the UAE, the post-Soviet world and China. One such trader is Haji Noorudin, a merchant in his late forties from a province in central Afghanistan. Haji Noorudin traded in Karkhano until the mid-2000s, when he moved to Yiwu. In China, he supplies his family business in Kabul with cosmetics, but he also runs a successful trading and transport company. Haji Noorudin is also increasingly involved in purchasing raw materials that are used in the production of soaps and nappies: he supplies these goods to his elder brother, who in 2016 established a factory to make these goods in Afghanistan's northern city of Mazar-e Sharif, and another factory in Uzbekistan.

Having once worked alongside the Taliban in *smuggling* goods across the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, the photos this trader now posts on his WeChat account demonstrate the important role of ties to influential Afghan politicians in his ability to enter the country's industrial sector today. In Yiwu today, traders such as Haji Noorudin actively distance their activities from the field of smuggling. In the spring of 2019, for example, traders in Yiwu established a Union of Afghan Transport Companies. On the occasion of its launch, the union released documents on WeChat which stipulated that transport companies in Yiwu would refuse to be involved in the transportation of 'branded' goods. While such goods inevitably continue to be transported to Afghanistan from China, this public attempt to distance themselves from such practices reveals an important shift in the traders' relationship to the category of smuggler, from one that was celebrated as a mark of autonomy under the Taliban government, to one of sensitivity today. This shift reflects a tightening of regulations in Yiwu in the context of the city's ambition to 'upgrade' to a centre of formal commerce that is part of the country's Belt and Road strategy. As we discussed above, it also reflects Afghanistan's political dynamics and the focus in the country on the deleterious implications of the informal economy for its economy and state structures in the context of the ongoing international intervention.

As with mobile families in other Asian contexts (Ong 1999), Haji Noorudin and similarly positioned traders emphasizes that the geographic expansion, capitalization, and increasingly formalized nature of their business activities have important implications for his social and familial reputation. Many traders argue that their mode of making a living is morally acceptable because of the circumstances of their lives in Afghanistan: 'We do what we can to make as much as we can because we don't know when we will need money to get our families out of Afghanistan and give them a life elsewhere.' More

established traders, such as Haji Noorudin, emphasize the shifts their family lives have undergone over the past two decades and how these have given rise to new ambitions and aspirations. He said to Magnus in January 2018,

When I was growing up, we had no option other than to help our families in business. There was a war going on in Afghanistan, and life was hard. We started doing business as children because we needed to earn a living. Now we are actively encouraging the education of our children. My own son has studied in an international school in Yiwu, and next year I am sending him to America to go to college.

Conclusion

Illegal trading practices and more particularly smuggling tend to be explored through a discursive approach that dwells on the self-portrayal of smugglers and their actions. Much of this work has sought to understand the types of moral justifications made by smugglers; after all, as Erami and Keshavarzian (2015) suggest, 'smuggling' is a moral-legal category (see also Botoeva 2019). As our interlocutors try to make a living out of illegal activities merged with more formal economic exchange, they seek to justify and build moral hierarchies about what they are doing and why, and who they harm in the process. Such assessments, calculations and circumstances shift. Shifts take place in the context of national and geopolitical dynamics, changes in the form of state and international commercial law, and, more intricately, as goods, money and people move from wholesale shops to warehouses in Yiwu, and from shipping containers to the buyers in the different geographical places where our interlocutors work. The malleability and contextually defined nature of the category 'smuggler' is illustrated across this article. Uzbek traders now positively identify with the term *kontraband*, a concept associated in Soviet times with immoral and corrosive practices. By contrast, Afghan traders distance themselves from the notion of *qochokbar*, a term widely associated in the period before the current intervention with masculine prowess and a healthy degree of autonomy from the state.

By analysing the multi-sited and fluid forms of the trade practices of the merchants of Uzbek and Afghan background, we have underlined the experiential aspects of the traders' moral, economic and geopolitical commercial activities as being 'outside the law'; these include forms of moving merchandise in ways that are referred to as smuggling. The diverse activities these traders undertake 'outside the law' accentuate the 'freedom of form' encountered in the trade and exchange chains in which legal and illegal, formal and informal practices are embedded. Beyond our informants' expressions of 'not having an option' other than discovering routes around the law, smuggling is more than simply a survival activity or coping mechanism deployed in times of poverty and crisis, or a strategy to maximize profit. The concept of 'freedom of form' is analytically helpful in this regard because it recognizes that the discovery of routes around and through the law is a skill that traders value and invest with moral significance. Smuggling and other trading practices that take place 'outside the law' involve a variety of labour embedded in forms of pleasure, aspiration, ambition and achievement.

Another contribution of this article has been to reflect on the extent to which notions of formal and informal globalization are of use for analysing the activities and contributions of the types of traders with whom we have been working. In so doing, we have sought to

bring attention to diverse trajectories of global trading networks and demonstrate their active and ongoing contribution to processes of economic globalization and connectivity. We have sought to demonstrate that the dichotomies used in existing metaphors do not fully encompass the ways in which trading practices outside the law and the trading networks of Uzbek and Afghan merchants are also integral to the production and reproduction of the global economy. We have also suggested that work that focuses on the particularities of economic life in the former Soviet stands to benefit from studies that explore interactions between commercial actors operating across regional and geopolitical contexts.

By taking into account how Central and South Asian markets are built on historic trading practices and networks, our concluding remarks also seek to initiate further debate on the globalization of the former Soviet world. Our comparison between Afghan and Uzbek trading networks brings attention to parallels between trading and smuggling across these contexts; equally importantly, it also points to intersections between Central and South-West Asia. Afghan trading networks and their importance to inter-Asian commerce, including Central Asia, have remained obscured by narrow definitions of 'Soviet' and 'post-Soviet' contexts. At the same time, emerging markets and informal practices in the contexts of the collapse of the Soviet Union were vital for Afghan traders to prosper, for example in Moscow, Dushanbe, Khujand, Tashkent and Odessa. There is scope for further research on the ways in which interactions between actors from countries of the former socialist *ecumene*, such as Vietnam, Libya, Yemen and Syria, and those from formerly Soviet societies have played an important role in shaping the distinctively 'post-Soviet' trading economy (Anderson 2018). Such research stands to reveal further aspects of the inter-regional and connective manner in which globalized forms of economic life 'outside the law' have emerged over the past three decades.

Notes

1. This article builds on long-term research as part of the TRODITIES project.
2. Concerning trade in and from China, Marsden (2017) has shown that traders are not marginal actors in the making of the roads and routes currently encompassed by the Belt and Road Initiative. See also Karrar (2013).
3. Our combined research includes 12 months in Yiwu (2013–2018) and short-term fieldwork in Turkey (2016, 2017), Ukraine (2013, 2014, 2016), South Korea (2016) and Russia (2012, 2014, 2015), as well as individual field trips to Tajikistan (Diana 2017) and to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Magnus 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).
4. For a nuanced analysis of trading networks from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Russia, in Yiwu, see Anderson (2018), Pliez (2012) and Skvirskaja (2018).
5. For a detailed discussion of the complexities of Uzbek identities in Central Asia see Finke (2014), Fumagalli (2007) and Liu (2012). For an ethno-historical analysis of Uzbek populations in northern Tajikistan, see Abashin (2015).
6. For a detailed analysis of the movements along these borders, see Reeves (2014).
7. Working in trade while holding a student visa is a silent, yet often illegal aspect of the life of the traders with whom we have spoken (Ibañez-Tirado, 2019; Marsden 2016b).
8. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine following from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has reduced such activities, though commodities do reportedly continue to move along this route.

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